

**Telephone interview with former HM2 Roger Pittman, Vietnam hospital corpsman.
Assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of
the Navy Medical Department, 10 February 2005.**

Where are you from originally?

I grew up in southwest Kansas near Liberal, KS. I went to a little country grade school with one room. I transferred to a bigger grade school in sixth grade and went to high school in a little town called Moscow, Kansas, along what was once the Santa Fe Trail. It was a rural farming community with ranches and farms. My nephew now farms what was my grandparents' and parents' farm altogether.

When did you join the Navy?

I was going to a little college in Kansas and really wasn't getting anywhere. I wasn't really interested in where it was all going to lead. I didn't want to farm. I didn't want to teach, which was pretty much all the role models. I took a job in the hospital in Hays, KS. The more I looked at health care, the more I became interested in it. I was taking an operating room technician course while I was going to college. One of the nurses said that her husband had been a Navy corpsman, and how well they were trained. She would go on and on about it.

I filed all that away as an interesting thing. Everything then seemed very hopeless. A friend and I were going to sell our cars and jump a freighter in San Francisco and travel the South Pacific and have a grand adventure. He didn't make it but I had really been serious about it. So looking at my choices, I looked at the Marine Corps but thought that I didn't want to dig fox holes and be shot at. I wanted to have a regular bed and have a comfortable life, and decide what I wanted to do with my life, then get out and go back to school. I joined the Navy in May of '65.

Did you go to boot camp in Great Lakes?

Yes. Then I moved right across the street to hospital corps school.

So, you knew you wanted to be a corpsman.

Absolutely. As you know, in the Navy, they give you a battery of tests that determine what you are qualified for. They told me that I qualified to be an electrician's mate. I didn't know what that exactly was but I came to find out that that would have been the best deal of all. In fact, that was one of the better rates in the Navy.

But I told them I didn't want to be an electrician's mate. I wanted to be a hospital corpsman. The senior petty officer at the desk said, "Well, this is really a great opportunity for you to get some excellent training. You don't get any better than an electrician's mate as far as jobs in the Navy.

"No. No. I want to be a hospital corpsman."

And he said, "Are you sure?"

And I said, "Yeah, I'm sure."

Well, that sealed my fate from that point on. I got into hospital corps school. I recall sitting in the hospital dining room about halfway through the program. This guy walks by on crutches. He's got his dress greens on. He's wearing a Purple Heart over his left breast pocket but he's got Navy insignias exactly like mine with a Navy caduceus on top. I said, "What is that?"

Some senior petty officer at the dining room table said, "That's a hospital corpsman. He's been wounded. He went with the Marines."

I said, "What do you mean he went with the Marines?" So that was the first time I heard that corpsmen were actually attached to the Marine Corps. And that was a most disheartening fact. That was not part of my plan.

What happened after corps school?

My first permanent duty station was Portsmouth, VA, at the Naval Hospital. They assigned me to SOQ 12. It was sort of a general medicine floor--spit and polish. We had VIP rooms. We had to watch exactly how we stood and sat. There were a lot of generals and admirals--senior officers. That got very boring so I asked to be assigned to a more medically intense floor. The head nurse said she would send me down to neurosurgical ICU when they weren't busy. So I started working down there and gleaned some very good experience.

About that time, I noticed that more and more corpsmen were being shipped out of Portsmouth Naval Hospital. It grew from 30 a week to 70 a week. Nobody was there for very long, maybe 3 or 4 months at the most. I had been there for 6 months when they called me down to Personnel telling me I had orders. When I got there, they couldn't tell me where the orders were to. I assumed they would be to the 1st or 3rd Marine Division.

When they finally came in a month later, which was really a very stressful time, I was surprised that I and another corpsman were not being assigned to the FMF. In fact, I went to Guam to OR tech school. About 4 months into the 6-month program, the head nurse came to me and said, "We have two students. The other student has another month to finish. He's closer to finishing his program than you are. They're asking me to pull one of our students for FMF." So I was reassigned and got orders to Camp Del Mar at Camp Pendleton. It was the Field Medical Service School. I didn't figure I'd last very long there.

The school had almost 450 corpsmen in it. When we finished the course, half of us packed our seabags and went directly to the airplane and were shipped to Vietnam. The rest of us were assigned to different units at Camp Pendleton. I was assigned to Headquarters Company, Headquarters Battalion, 5th Marine Division.

I wound up doing flight physicals on pilots who were coming and going from Vietnam. I heard some stories about their exploits. Otherwise it was very boring, routine duty without much challenge. Again I asked for a transfer to some unit in which I could get some medical experience. They assigned me to the 5th Hospital Company at Camp Pendleton. Again, I wound up not in the clinic but becoming the commanding officer's right-hand person, like Radar in "M*A*S*H." I don't know what it was. I just ended up in these odd positions that just kept shunting me away from what I really wanted to do.

I got some experience from working sick call after hours and so forth. The clinic was right across the street from the main PX.

Again, they started assigning corpsmen out of the 5th Hospital Company and I was one of the last ones to leave there and go to Vietnam. It was September of '67. I went the usual route--Okinawa and so forth.

I wound up in country about the 5th of October and spent 2 or 3 days at Dong Ha trying to get to the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines when they were in the outer perimeter duty at Con Thien when it was under siege. That was my first experience with combat.

It was all an absolute, mind-bending experience. In fact, they just shoved me out of the helicopter onto an LZ. The last words I heard out of the chopper . . . The crew chief said, "Just keep low."

I landed down on my feet and stayed low. As soon as the chopper left, I heard this voice coming out of the bushes saying, "Stay low and come over here."

They were getting incoming at that very moment and I didn't even realize what it sounded like. The first round I heard came in and landed maybe 75 or 100 yards away. I saw the flash and it just didn't register what was going on. I looked down and everybody was in their hole and looking up at me like "You stupid fool."

The other corpsman I was assigned to in that platoon filled me in. He had been in the bush 2 or 3 months and had seen a considerable amount of combat. I spent a week talking to him about survival.

I was in Echo Company and then I was assigned to another platoon soon after that--Fox Company, 1st Platoon. The senior corpsman of the battalion told me to keep an eye on another corpsman. He was acting "strange." So that was my job--to watch this corpsman and make sure he was okay. He was and he wasn't. He had gone "bush." He had totally adapted to his environment. I didn't recognize that at the time but he had interesting ways of doing things. He had become very wise in the ways he had adapted to his surroundings and conducted himself.

What kinds of things did he do?

His hooch was no more than 6 or 8 inches tall. It had a very low profile. He would leave it open at both ends. The fighting hole was always at the head of the hooch where he slept. It was no more than 6 inches from where his head was. This is a very critical place when you're receiving a lot of incoming. He taught me a lot of things about what different colored tracers to look for. He taught me what flares meant as signals. And I'd only been with him for 4 or 5 days when I set up a hooch according to his style. He designed his fighting hole in a very particular way, a certain depth and width. He was obsessed with everything he did.

When you talk about a hooch, are you talking about a shelter half that was made into something else?

Exactly. The shelter half wasn't peaked; there was a little slope to it in the middle. But it was no more than 6 or 8 inches off the ground. We slept with our faces practically up against this plastic sheet. The idea was not to have a high profile, which would be a target.

Anyway, we moved down the hill from Con Thien and they were telling us that we were going back to Dong Ha for some rest and relaxation for a few days. We had to stop at a bridge called the "Washout." It was the road that left Route 9 at Cam Lo and went up to Con Thien. It was a little dirt road that had been paved by the Seabees. It was a good road but it was always mined.

The "Washout" was a bridge over a good sized river that we had to guard for a few nights. The second night we were there, we had stayed alert until midnight. In fact, everybody in the platoon had to stay alert. Then 50 percent of the people could sleep. The corpsmen didn't have radio watch in that platoon so the other corpsman and I went to sleep. I wasn't fully asleep when I heard a flare go up in the air. It was a red flare. I remember the corpsman having told me that a red flare was a bad sign. In fact, a red flare was shot up only if a position was being overrun. And, in fact, that was just what was starting to happen.

We were overrun that night and I treated my first casualties. I got separated from the platoon. There was a lot of tear gas and smoke in the area so we had to put on our gas masks. And those fogged up immediately because we were all hyperventilating and it was a hot, muggy night, as you might imagine.

During that night, I somehow got separated. A sergeant I knew found me and he told me he had casualties up the hill. He gave me the general direction, but when I got up to the top of the hill, I found myself all alone with nobody in sight at all. The only light there was made by occasional flares going off. I couldn't use the flare light because I was on top of the hill and very visible and highly silhouetted.

So I stayed down and finally I found a shallow trench and there was a Marine with a head wound. He had some bleeding from his scalp and was in and out of consciousness and not coherent at all times. He would occasionally vomit. I knew what this was from my old neurosurgery days at Portsmouth. I kept looking at him to see if he was okay but I knew I had to get him out of there. But this was around midnight and I knew there was not much of a chance of us getting evacuated.

Finally a second Marine came up. I was happy to see him. His name was CAPT Nigh. He had been shot through the thigh. He had an M16, which drastically increased our firepower. I only had a .45 with seven rounds of ammo. That's all they could spare when I checked out the weapon. This is very important. The supplies and the support we had were horrendous. It turned out that the .45 didn't work. And they would only dispense one clip of .45 ammo. I had a poncho but no poncho liner. I had no air mattress. I didn't have jungle utilities. There were just no supplies--zero!

Did you have a unit 1?

I had a unit 1 and it was fairly well stocked but no 782 gear. They had canteens but no canteen covers. I had an old, torn-up flak jacket. I look back on it now and think about how we were told we were the greatest army in the world and, as far as I'm concerned, we were third rate. I had seen guerrilla units better equipped than we were.

You say you had a sidearm but the .45 didn't function.

It didn't work all the time. Later on, I had a misfire in the middle of a patrol at night with the gun in my holster. It misfired and almost blew my foot away.

It fired in your holster?

Yes. So I never trusted it after that. When I fam [familiarization] fired the weapon when I first got it, it seemed not to fire correctly. It would sometimes misfire and jam. But it was the best they had at the time. And, as I said, I only had seven rounds of ammunition. And this was a Marine unit that was involved in the heaviest combat at the time in Vietnam. The Battalion's combat effectiveness was at best borderline.

When is this?

October '67.

I'm presuming that by this time the M14s were gone and everyone had an M16.

That was the theory. The battalion had just gotten their M16s shortly before I arrived. The platoon commanders and the company commanders didn't quite trust the M16 so there was

at least one M14 in each squad. The M16 was horrendous. It was the worst weapon I had ever seen in my life and I had grown up with a lot of firearms. Initially, the M16s just didn't work in those jungle conditions. I know there was a lot of investigation into this issue but from the platoon's standpoint down to the squad, the Marines in Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines had no confidence in this weapon. Everybody had a cleaning rod already put together and ready. The problem we were having in firefights was the ammunition. The shell casing would jam into the chamber, and the extractor mechanism would extract just the butt of the casing and leave the body of the cartridge in the firing chamber. This was a really bad situation and caused a lot of Marine dead.

You're out of luck in this situation.

You're out of luck and everybody knows that if you can't punch the round out of the chamber because it's jammed, you're really screwed. And this was not an uncommon occurrence. In fact, it was a very common occurrence, too common not to do something about it.

They tried to correct it with this chrome sliding mechanism. That helped a little bit but it didn't correct the whole problem. That situation continued for several months.

You say you were under equipped and didn't have what you needed. What happened with the Marine with the head wound?

That night, I knew our position had been overrun and the NVA were all over the area. Most of the fighting occurred down in the ravine about 50 yards below me inside the tree line near the stream. That's where the battalion headquarters had been overrun. During the night, there was a lot of screaming and yelling. Every once in awhile someone would say, "Corpsman, corpsman, come and get me." Or they would cry for their mother. And I'd hear them.

So I started down into this ravine two or three times. And CAPT Nigh said, "If you go down there, Doc, you're dead. That could be the enemy. It could be a Marine, but you don't know. So, don't go down there."

That bugged the heck out of me--and still does. But he was right. I could not assume that whoever was calling for their mother or corpsman was legitimate and not an NVA.

I stayed on top of the hill the rest of the night. The fellow with the head wound was okay. When the sun came up, I carried the wounded Marine down to the chopper that was coming into the LZ. I felt sad because they were loading bodies onto the chopper. Twenty-one individuals died that night. Four were corpsmen. There were three or four brand new lieutenants--second lieutenants who had come in that day. They didn't even last 6 hours before being killed when Golf Company's position was overrun. They were all in the same fox hole together and were told to stay there. The NVA came in with satchel charges. The NVA were dressed in Marine Corps 782 gear and carried M16s. They had come in behind the fighting positions and threw in satchel charges. That's how they opened up a wide breach in our perimeter.

Was there a name for this battle or firefight?

The battle was called the "wash out."

When did it occur?

October 14th, 1967.

After my first night of treating combat casualties and having been up all night and having several hours of adrenalin flowing through my veins, and tear gas still irritating my eyes, I felt exuberant but also sad. I didn't think I knew any of the people who were killed that night but it turns out that I did. I was glad it was over because it was worse than I thought it would ever be. The confusion, the total chaos, was compounded by everything else. Not knowing where the enemy was and not having an adequate weapon. And feeling fairly exposed.

All you had during the battle was that .45 pistol that didn't work.

Correct. I had a bayonet that I had gotten off somebody but that was about it.

So, they pulled us back to Dong Ha that day. We mounted a convoy, and as we were going back, we passed some civilians as we got closer to Cam Lo. Some of the kids were giving us the finger. I thought, "This is not gonna be a good deal. The civilians don't appreciate us being here." My dissatisfaction grew with being involved in a war that we shouldn't have been involved in at all. Maybe our intentions were right, but the way we fought it was wrong.

Anyway, I got sick with dysentery, diarrhea, and high fever when we got back to Dong Ha. I spent 3 days in the battalion aid station hospital and lost about 10 or 15 pounds. The abdominal cramps were to stay with me pretty much for the next 6 months as I stayed in the field. I think that's why we all lost weight.

By this time you were feeling pretty bad physically. And emotionally, you weren't in great condition either because you're starting to think, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Exactly. But I still had hope that we were doing the right thing.

They sent Fox Company to the coast above the Cua Viet River to an area called C-4. It was a little outpost between Cua Viet and the DMZ. It turned out to be very, very pleasant. In fact, we had bunkers to sleep in. It was a sandy area so I wasn't seeing as much immersion foot, or trench foot, as some people call it.

So you had been seeing a lot of trench foot previously?

I saw it all the time. When we were at Con Thien it was the rainy season.

What were the symptoms?

White, blanched out toes with loss of feeling. If you put your hand in water for awhile, it gets all shriveled up and looks like a white prune. Well, that's what trench foot looks like. Everybody had trench foot at Con Thien because it was always wet. All our fox holes were filled with rain water. In the middle of the night it just got cold and miserable. We didn't have any tents. In the platoon command post there were two corpsmen, a radio operator, and the lieutenant. We made a hooch out of banana leaves and C-ration cardboard. And we slept on banana leaves. And that's the way we slept--in the rain. And it rained more than I've ever seen it rain in my life.

And we never had any socks at Con Thien. Those who did have socks, had holes in them. Nobody had two pairs of socks; that would have been an unheard of luxury. So, again, the best infantry in the world had sore feet. We couldn't walk. It hurt every step we took. That was also part of the screwed up supply system.

When we got over to C-4 it was a sandy beach area. We got the Marines to take their boots off and we got them dried out. I scrounged up a few pairs of socks I could hand out to those guys who were suffering the worst trench foot.

Was there any treatment besides drying the feet?

No. We just had to dry out the feet. Occasionally, there was powder but if you were going to put it in your jungle boots, it would just become paste.

The perfect treatment was getting the feet out of the wet boots and get them dried out as much as possible--at least twice a day.

Had you gotten some jungle utilities by this time?

When I got sick, I went up to the supply hooch at Dong Ha and they had a big box of jungle utilities that had been taken off of casualties. I got a pair of jungle boots and jungle utilities, 782 gear, and canteen covers. I also got a poncho liner. I was really living in luxury at that time. So I was better equipped at C-4 than I was at Con Thien.

Did you get a better sidearm or did you still have that lousy .45?

I still didn't fully appreciate how bad that weapon really was until I went on patrol at C-4 and it went off in my holster. Only then did I realize that I needed to get something better. But nothing else was available.

What was that incident when it went off in your holster?

It was a squad-size patrol. We left the perimeter when it got dark. Just before that, the point man chambered a round and took his weapon off safety. Everybody else would put a round in their chamber but put it on safety. As we left the perimeter and headed south along the beach area, just inside a tree line, we spread out single file along this small trail. I was behind the radio operator, the traditional position of a corpsman. We were moving very, very slowly and stopping every few feet. We had taped all our loose equipment so there would not be anything shiny or loose on us that would make noise. Then, all of a sudden, there was a bang! A shot rang out and it sounded like it was very close. Everybody hit the ditch. Everybody was afraid that this was the opening of an ambush. After several minutes when just this one shot was heard, somebody started whispering, "What's going on?" Everybody then checked their weapons because it became obvious that someone had had a misfire. The squad leader came down the line and said, "Doc. Where's your .45?"

I said, "It's in the holster." When I moved my finger down in the bottom of the holster, I noticed a hole in it. And I could smell that the weapon had just been discharged. There was still smoke.

Different Marines who knew about the .45 offered me different opinions as to what had happened. The .45 is not supposed to be able to be discharged without two or three of the functions being available.

The safety was up in the lock position so it can't fire.

And you have to have a full grip on it. Over the years, I've heard different opinions but I don't have any idea what happened.

You're lucky it didn't hit you in the leg.

When we looked at my footprint, there was a half-moon crater around my boot print. It just missed me. Because we were too far from the perimeter, the Marines called in and wanted to know what was going on. Then the captain came up and asked if we were in contact with the

enemy. The squad leader was cool about it and said, "We heard the shot but we don't know what happened."

Regardless of any excuses, an accidental discharge would have been a court martial offense. The Marines covered for me that night and it never went any further.

What was your unit at this point?

Fox Company, 1st Platoon, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. We got into some contact the next morning with some NVA. We were on a little 2- or 3-day operation after Dong Ha. We went into an area north of Cam Lo between Cam Lo and Cua Viet, north of Route 9. They took us up by convoy part way, and then we hiked into the hills northeast of Cam Lo. We set up a perimeter that night. We were all asleep in the middle of the night and all of a sudden we got incoming. Two or three rockets that landed did so inside our perimeter. The executive officer of the battalion was killed and the commanding officer of 2/4 was severely wounded.

How did you meet then LTCOL Weise?

I think they had sent out the regimental operations officer and he was our commanding officer for a few days until Weise took over. So then I went to Fox Company. They brought us back to Quang Tri and we were there a few days when I first heard of LTCOL Weise.

Actually the first time I had anything to do with Weise was . . . This is funny. I had been taken out of Fox Company, 1st Platoon and made senior corpsman of Fox Company. We were on the west side of Camp Carroll guarding a bridge. It was just below the Eagle's Nest, a very high, prominent hill just above the bridge there on Route 9. We had been there 2 or 3 weeks and it was real easy duty. We were playing cards every day and hanging out getting a good suntan. This was in February of '68. We were a battalion landing team at that time. They had sent us to the Philippines and we had come back for Tet. And we were now guarding this bridge on Route 9 that went on to Khe Sanh.

During the night, one of the corpsmen from the platoon came up to the company command post where I was sleeping and said, "We've got a really sick Marine. I don't know what's wrong with him. We need some help."

So I went down to the platoon position in the middle of the night and found this Marine who I knew. He was just withering in pain and practically incoherent. I couldn't get any kind of history out of him. It didn't look like anything I had seen before as far as malaria or diarrhea, or anything like that.

I decided that we had to give him something for pain so we gave him a shot of morphine. It may have helped a tiny bit but not a whole lot. The guy was still in a lot of pain. I knew this Marine and knew he wasn't faking it. It just didn't seem right.

I finally gave him another shot of morphine and he relaxed a bit. His abdomen was hard and he was vomiting by that time. With another corpsman, I made a decision to get this guy out. I went to the command post and the radio operator put me in touch with the battalion surgeon, who was about a mile or mile and a half up the road with the battalion command post. I told him that the guy was really sick and we needed to get him out right away. The battalion surgeon said that we couldn't get him out. LTCOL Weise said that nobody was going to go down the road (Route 9) because there was just too great a chance of an ambush. "There's no way. Sit on him."

So I went back. The guy was just getting worse and worse. He was starting to run a fever so I went back to the company command post a second time and said, "This guy is in bad condition and my feeling is that he's gonna die."

LTCOL Weise came on the radio and said, "You've gotta sit on him."

And I said, "I'll sit on him but he's gonna die."

LTCOL Weise said, "Well I don't want to risk coming down the road tonight, picking this guy up. We can't fly him out of where you are because the hills are too steep and there's no way to get a medevac into your position tonight."

I said, "It's your call, sir. The guy's gonna die."

And he replied, "You had better be right."

So they sent down a couple of tanks and some infantry on top of the tanks, picked up the Marine, and took him back to the battalion command post, which was in a level, clear field, and they medevaced him out that night.

I went to sleep for a little bit that night. And the first thing I know is that the battalion surgeon has asked for me to come up to talk to him as soon as possible. They sent a patrol down to get me. The battalion surgeon was there and he said, "We're reassigning you to Echo Company, 2nd Platoon."

This was quite a demotion from being the company senior corpsman. He was doing this because I had insisted on getting the Marine out that night. The only question I asked the battalion surgeon was, "How's the Marine?"

He said, "Well, he had a ruptured appendix." So that was my first encounter with LTCOL Weise.

So, it wasn't a favorable first opinion, then.

No, not a bit. But I did what I had to do. And I learned a valuable lesson. You're gonna suffer the consequences if you make a decision that's not favorable to the process. I've carried that for my whole medical career. Occasionally you have to go against conventional wisdom and stand up for the patient. I've made that a central part of who I am professionally. Thanks to GEN Weise, I am used to it now.

Was it right to risk other people getting him out of there? That was not my decision. I just told it the way it was. The guy would have died. There was a very good probability of a very bad outcome if we hadn't gotten him out that night. So, even though my impression of Weise wasn't positive, he taught me a valuable lesson. If you know right from wrong, you always have to go with right and do the right thing. Luckily, the rescue party wasn't ambushed.

So you ended up in another outfit.

In a platoon level. And again I was going out on nighttime ambushes and patrols. It was just a totally bad experience. Contact with the NVA was starting to pick up. The platoon I was with had a certain stretch of Route 9 to minesweep and patrol and conduct some very aggressive night ambushes. Two or three of the patrols were ambushed. Tet was really starting to have an effect on what we did.

It was the first time I had an encounter with a snake crawling over me. There were rumors almost every night that we were going to get overrun. Everybody was really nervous. And I was in a funky mood anyway because I had been demoted down to a platoon again and I knew how tough it was going to be to survive another few months. And indeed, that was the case.

They flew us out of that hill country--the mountainous area around Camp Carroll. They flew the whole battalion down to the flatlands--the rice paddy area northeast of Dong Ha. We replaced 1/3 at a big base camp. Later the camp was named "Camp Big John" for Sgt. Maj. John Malnar soon after he was killed at Dai Do. LTCOL Weise was instrumental in renaming this base camp.

When they flew us down to the rice paddy small village area, most of it had been converted into a free-fire zone. So there were not a lot of villagers in this area. We immediately got into contact the first morning I was there. We slept in a village called Mai Loc, which was along the Cua Viet River.

We got up the next morning and moved into the battalion perimeter and then immediately we followed Fox Company out of the perimeter. Fox Company didn't quite get into the village but were shot up pretty badly trying to do so. I lost two friends--two corpsmen that first morning. In fact, I said "Hello" to them and 5 minutes later they were both dead along with six Marines. It was just a horrendous firefight. We held a position just above them so I could see what was going on but it was just a really bad situation.

And every day after that we were in a firefight. It was very stressful. Before this, maybe we'd get into a firefight once, twice, or three times a month. And maybe you weren't directly involved but were a few hundred yards away. Maybe rounds were whistling over your head. But these firefights in these small, abandoned villages were very intense. I was always very heavily involved. I had people shot and killed right next to me. So I went into a different survival mode at that time.

We had what they called "scoop meetings" the night before. They would tell us what we were going to do the next day--the general layout of the operation, where our platoon was going to be, what our objectives were, and what we could expect. Well, we knew what to expect. We knew what we were going to do. We were going to walk up to the village tree line and the first Marines that were there were going to be shot and killed. Then the corpsmen were going to get up and treat the wounded. And if they made it, they made it. And if they didn't, they didn't.

This went on for 5 or 6 days of absolutely horrendous combat. It really got really difficult to live. I knew I wasn't going to live. The people around me were not living so why should I expect to survive? It was not a matter of if but when.

I would get so nervous after one of these scoop meetings, that I'd get diarrhea and cramping. The dysentery made it so much worse. I'd spend 2 or 3 hours having the worst diarrhea of my life along with stomach cramps, compounded by this nervous feeling and anxiety of knowing I wouldn't make it. Everybody that was with me had the same feeling even though nobody was talking about it. You could tell that everybody was depressed. There was no playing around and not a lot of talking going on.

Things changed for me. I began to personify death. I saw this image in the sky above me. Death was the Grim Reaper, a bony skeleton figure dressed in a black robe. I said, "No. I'm not gonna do this. You can go to hell. I'm not going to die. I'm not gonna allow you to take me today."

And for some reason this worked for me. And from that point, I was not even as half anxious as I was before. My goal was beating the Grim Reaper and it worked for me. It wasn't fool-proof but it worked most of the time!

We'd be sitting there in a rice paddy or in a village getting ready to jump off into an assault position. It would be moments away. You'd get the word. "Okay, guys. Let's move out." And from that step on, you knew that you were subject to being killed. As soon as you

moved out, it was in that assault mode and you knew that people were going to die. Was it going to be you or somebody next to you? You didn't know. It was a roll of the dice. And several times there were several rolls of several dice and a lot of guys died.

The chaplain was holding memorial services at the battalion CP once a week. There would be 10, 15, or 20 helmets on M16s with their bayonets stuck in the ground. Those of us who believed in God and wanted to say a prayer for these guys would line up and the chaplain would lead us in prayer. We knew that next week, this could be one of us.

At that time I realized the war was fruitless, too, and I was coming to an overall realization that we shouldn't be there, or at least that we should be fighting this war differently. We were still poorly supplied, maybe better than we were previous to Tet, but not that much better. We would assault the same village two or three times in 2 or 3 weeks and take it, and then abandon it. Then have to come back the next week and retake it. And people were dying as a result of that. None of this made any sense at all. Not to me. I'm a farm kid and you survive on the farm by being practical and using common sense. But this was just not anything close to what I ever saw in my life. It was a waste of human beings. It was a waste of young men. And I must have become overtly disenchanted with the whole thing. I got to the point where I realized that I wasn't there for my country. I was not there for the guys who were around me. We were there for each other and that's the way it was. And we were going to try to help each other survive whatever it took. It was an unspoken pact among all of us.

We all talked about it every once in a while. When we didn't have other things on our minds and when we weren't told to do something, we would sit around and talk about it. There wasn't a private or a PFC, lance corporal, or corporal who didn't realize that the way that war was being fought was wrong. It was only in the upper echelons--the captains, the colonels, the generals, the politicians--that it got diluted; we couldn't win that war the way it was being fought. The fact that the grunt living in the fox hole knew that we couldn't win that war got lost up the chain was a source of a lot of discussion, and on my mind and on the minds of those who lived and those who died.

Were there any other occasions you remember that you think are worth mentioning or did the whole experience have a kind of sameness about it?

It was that way until about the 1st of April when all of a sudden all the casualties stopped. It was as though someone turned the water off. And it became quiet. As the days went on, I got this really bad feeling that this wasn't right. Something bad was happening. All our patrols and all our nighttime ambushes went out and then came back with no contact.

I was made an E-5--HM2--on the 16th of April and was taken out of Hotel Company for a month. I served with CAPT Williams, who later received the Navy Cross. He was a real cool guy and we all liked him. LT [Timothy] Shorten was the executive officer, and I was with him when he was killed on the 1st of April. He went over to take a piss in the bushes and was killed. That's how life can be. I had sat down and opened up a can of fruit cocktail. If I had gone over in the bushes with him, I would have been killed, too. That's how it was. You'd be alive one minute and . . .

So everything was quiet in April. I was sent to the battalion aid station and was assigned to doing sick call. One day Chief Gorsage came up to me and said, "You've got really bad jungle rot. You look like shit. You need to go to the ship, catch a movie tonight or tomorrow night, and pick up some rabies vaccine and medical supplies. Get yourself a shower and get cleaned up."

I was excited. I hadn't seen the rear for 4 or 5 months--not a shower, not any bathing at all to speak of except out in the rain. So I got up early in the morning before the sun came up, and went out to the LZ. The sun was just barely coming up. The landing zone supply radio man was on the LZ and we were just talking. All of a sudden, we heard gunfire off in the distance. I knew it was Hotel Company because it was their TAOR [tactical area of responsibility]. A chopper came as the firefight grew. I thought, "This is not good."

I got on the chopper and flew to the ship--the *Iwo Jima*. It was our rear because we were still a battalion landing team at that time. The Marines and corpsmen in the field never saw the rear. To see the ship was like hoping to go to heaven. It wasn't routine for someone in the field even to see the ship. It was kind of a sacred area to be enjoyed by rear echelon personnel.

So I turned in my list of medical supplies and went to the shower area where the corpsmen lived aboard. I got a towel and just walked into the shower with my clothes on because I was going to wash those, too. As I was doing that, one of the other corpsmen came in and said, "Hey Pittman. Get your shit together. The Chief wants you back at the BAS ASAP!"

This was bad news. I wasn't gonna catch a movie. I wasn't going to be able to relax a little bit and have a decent meal. As I was putting my clothes back on, which were still wet, I heard the public address system announcement. "Medevacs inbound. Medevacs inbound."

So I got my medical supplies and got on one of the choppers that had just delivered some of the casualties. There was still blood on the floor of the chopper. I just knew that this wasn't going to be good. As we were coming into the LZ, I could see what was going on. The landing zone was packed with casualties.

I jumped off the chopper. We had two docs in the battalion landing team. I went over to one and he said, "I need you to start CPR on these two guys right here."

I said, "Who's gonna help me?"

He said, "You've got to do it by yourself."

So I lined up these two guys who needed CPR and started giving them mouth-to-mouth and chest compressions. I flew those to Dong Ha by chopper while I was working on both of them at the same time. We flew over Dai Do as the battle had just started.

We worked all that day, maybe got an hour or two of sleep that night, and worked all the next day. On the third day of the battle, the Chief called me and another corpsman, a friend of mine, Jack Fillingner, to the bunker of the battalion aid station, just a short distance from the landing zone, where we were working on casualties. He said, "You and Fillingner need to go up to the front. Pittman, you're going back to Fox Company and Jack, you're going back to Golf Company." That was 10 o'clock in the morning.

Jack and I went and got our gear and took an outboard motor boat up the river to Dai Do. It was maybe a mile or so. I joined Fox Company. We received incoming immediately. Jack and I got down in a trench together. This was really heavy artillery. I think it was 152mm NVA howitzers from the DMZ. Jack, who had already been wounded twice, said, "Rog. I think I'm gonna pass out. Take my pulse."

I reached over as we were laying there in the trench and took his pulse. It was 140 something. Later on, in '88, Jack and I got together and I said to him, "Jack. I don't know whether I took your pulse or mine."

So Jack went to Golf and I went to Fox. I was sitting next to the radio operator of Fox Company--CAPT Butler's radioman. I could hear gunfire off and on in the other part of the battle area. All of a sudden, LTCOL Weise came up on the radio and said, "Golf Company is

being overrun for the second time. We need help now. Break, Fox 6, Fox 6. This is Dixie Diner 6.”

I’ll never forget those words. Dixie Diner 6 was LTCOL Weise’s call sign. Fox 6 was CAPT Butler’s call sign. He was the CO of Fox Company. Weise said, “I want you to join up with Golf Company’s right flank now. Move out now!”

We moved out single file through the village we were in and went through the bottom part of Dai Do. It was kind of an L-shaped village. We were the lower part of the L as we assaulted through Dai Do. It was fairly quiet. There were dead NVA all over the rice paddy. They were starting to bloat and stink. We got through most of Dai Do. I was on the right flank of the company. I looked across the rice paddy on the far right flank and realized that there were probably a dozen or so NVA in front of me about 75 yards away running at right angles to my position. I had just passed a sniper team a few moments before. I yelled back to send word to the sniper team that we had NVA to our front. They came up. I then got distracted more to my left. The firing picked up and I took shelter behind a house wall that had been bombed out. The wall was probably up to my chest in height.

I knew there were Marines in front of me in the tree line that were looking out across the rice paddy that we were obviously going to have to cross in order to get to Golf Company’s right flank. I was kneeling down behind the wall for protection because of all the small arms fire we were getting. Somebody suddenly said, “Charge!”

I couldn’t get around the wall in time to join the assault but I looked up over the edge of the wall slightly and all I could see were Marines out into the rice paddy who had gotten out of the tree line maybe 10 feet in front of me, and they were going down like rag dolls, just kind of half spinning and falling in a way that was not natural. I realized that they had all been shot. Everybody in front of me had been killed. There was nobody there except me.

I finished going around the wall after a few moments of hyperventilating. There was nobody there. There was nobody around me. I couldn’t find anybody. I couldn’t go out into the rice paddy and expose myself because there was still heavy small arms fire. Going out there would have meant meeting the same fate as the Marines. And nobody was even hollering for “Corpsman Up!”

As near as I could tell, I was one of six survivors in that assault group. I don’t know what happened after that. I went back in ’97 with some of the guys from the battalion and looked at that area because there was a big block of space and time that I don’t remember. It was very, very odd, because I could tell you exactly what I did in other firefights and when I did it. And I looked at the distance between where I last remembered and where I first remembered later, and it’s a good half a mile through a village that was infiltrated with NVA. They were all over the place. There were pockets of NVA that were just overrunning everybody. They were coming out of the rice paddy and shooting Marines who were still alive.

The next thing I remember is crawling on my stomach through Dai Do and running across some boots sticking out of bushes. They were jungle boots. And for the first time I realized that maybe I was back with some Marines. And indeed I was. I linked up with them. A lot of casualties were now coming back through the village. I looked up and there was LTCOL Weise and all the radio operators maybe 30 feet in front of me.

I knew that the CP [command post] was ahead of me. There was a big bomb crater and I got down in it and started treating casualties. The Marines around the bomb crater’s rim were some guys I knew from Fox Company mortar platoon. They were grabbing the wounded as they were stumbling by and bringing them down to the bottom of the crater where I was. I was

patching them up and they were very badly wounded. The only thing that was saving them was the fact that they were walking. If they couldn't walk, they wouldn't be there. They were in shock. Another's arm was half off. They were just terribly horrendous wounds with advanced shock.

There was no way I could hold them in that position and do them any good. I would hold one badly wounded Marine until I got hold of another that wasn't as bad. And I would link those two guys up and point them to the rear, the south edge of Dai Do, and send them back by themselves. There was no way we could spare anybody to take them back. The system worked pretty good.

All of a sudden, the Marines on the lip of the crater got terribly nervous and we could hear the NVA assault coming our way. We knew that if we gave up this position, we were all dead. I was down at the bottom of the crater and trying to get to the top of the lip to see what was going on, when I looked up and saw CAPT [Manuel S.] Vargas coming along the edge of the crater. He had his right arm around LTCOL Weise, who was stumbling. He wasn't walking very well. In fact, I don't think he was walking at all. LTCOL Weise had his right arm around his radio operator, who was severely wounded with blood all over him. LTCOL Weise looked like he was in shock.

We could see the NVA now coming from our front--the north side. We could smell 'em. We could feel 'em. They were trying to get around us on the left side. LTCOL Weise looked down at me directly and said, "Doc. Let's get the hell out of here!" And that was the best thing I had heard in a long time. I stumbled in behind him. Everybody grabbed somebody who was wounded, and we started stumbling through the village. It was like every man for himself and grab a friend. Men in rags, blood, smoke, splintered trees, explosions, white, dirty faces. It was time to die but the Marines faces said "not without a fight." It was an uncontrolled controlled fighting retreat. None of us were running. We wanted to but we couldn't because the NVA had come around us and they were blocking our exit from the village to the south.

I didn't want to go through the village, and wound up with a corporal on the west side of the village along an irrigation ditch. He and I crawled and ran our way through the bloody, watery ditch. The corporal was in front of me as we ran down the ditch bent over as low as we could. And all of a sudden, he stopped and I almost ran into him. He looked off to the left and said, "Doc. Look at that!"

I looked over and about 100 or 150 yards through this clearing--a large pasture. You could barely see little trees moving at the bottom of the tree line. The trees appeared to be moving. I wanted to think that I was hallucinating. I wanted to believe I was not seeing what I was seeing. And then I saw the whole tree line moving. Oh, man! And we had at least a quarter of a mile to go before we reached the river, which I thought we could swim and get the hell away from there.

The corporal lifted his M16 and said, "I'm gonna open up."

I said, "No, you're not. We're gettin' the hell out of here. You open up on them, that's just gonna piss 'em off. What are you going to accomplish with your M16? Nothing. We're gettin' the hell out of here."

So, I started out crawling, moving a little slower this time, but we were just not gonna make it before this movement out of the tree line was going to intercept us. I looked down through the ditch toward the river. I could see that the ditch formed a little "V" as it emptied into the Cua Viet River. I saw a Navy gunboat come into the "V" and stop. That was not all good news. We looked like NVA with mud all over us. We couldn't be identified. So I kneeled

down and waved my hand. I knew they were looking at me. I waved my hands to let them know we weren't NVA. That was a very good thing.

Then I saw their guns swing away from us toward the tree line and they opened up with a breech-loaded 81mm mortar, a 20mm, and a couple .50s that worked over the tree line. Once they opened up, we just ran like hell down that trench and got to the bottom south edge of Dai Do. We found other Marines there who had come down parallel to us through the village. We had wounded, which we got out. We did a head count and then set up for the night. There were six of us left out of the platoon I was with. There were only about 25 guys from Golf Company left. The whole battalion at that time, which included cooks and clerks out of the rear, maybe amounted to only 250 guys left in the whole battalion.

We knew we were going to be assaulted that night. "Puff," the gun ship, was flying around most of the night. We didn't have enough Marines to put up a 360 perimeter so everyone faced forward and listened to the rear. I had an M1 carbine and a bunch of grenades by that time and a .45 that worked. I also had a bayonet.

You were well armed.

I had changed my weaponry some time about the time in January. I initially picked up an M79 grenade launcher with fleshette rounds, thinking this would be a good weapon for me to have for close in stuff. The ammunition was too heavy. Then I went to an assault 12 gauge shotgun but that was too hard to keep clean. I wound up buying this M1 carbine with several ammunition clips from a corpsman who was leaving the field. It was his own personal weapon. Corpsmen could do that. I knew a corpsman who had bought a Thompson submachine gun from an ARVN for 50 bucks. He used that. He was the envy of everyone around him. It was a great weapon.

We thought we were going to have to assault back through Dai Do the next day but we didn't have enough Marines left in the battalion. As far as I knew, there were just a few officers left. In fact, I didn't see any officers at all.

Had LTCOL Weise been medevaced by that time?

Yes. It turns out that Fritz [Warren], the operations officer, was now officially in charge of the battalion. That next morning as we were getting ready to assault Dai Do again everybody was in a very somber mood. I was appointed battalion senior corpsman. And at the last minute, we saw 1/3 coming across the river in amtracs. Once they crossed, they moved through us and they assaulted into the village. They didn't have any contact that day but evacuated all our casualties and recovered our KIAs.

That night I was in charge of setting up the battalion aid station for counting the dead. I think 70 KIAs were logged in, counted, identified, tagged, body-bagged, and left on the LZ for first light to be evacuated. I know, for a fact, that that only represented a part of the casualties and KIAs of the battle. It was a really bad experience because I knew some of these guys, and so I purposely chose not to identify the KIAs from Fox Company that night. It was 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning when we finally got to Fox Company's KIAs. When they came up to be identified, I left. I just didn't want the memories.

So that was the worst thing you'd ever seen in your life.

It was. It was the worst--the longest experience of combat any of us had ever seen. Some historians have used the word Tarawa-like, or Iwo Jima, or Peleliu. It was horrendous and

unrelenting. And it was worse than we thought. When the numbers were counted on both sides in full detail, it turns out that we were up against a whole division of NVA with something like 600 to 800 Viet Cong cadre attached. All of this is depicted in Keith Nolan's book, *Magnificent Bastards*. They were also supported by heavy artillery during daytime, which was a little unusual for that time of the war.

Did you ever have any contact with Dr. [Runas] Powers during the battle?

Yes. He was one of the physicians working at the LZ during Dai Do.

General Weise sent me some photos of the LZ. One was the famous picture of him with the cigar in his mouth. In the background is Dr. Powers taking care of casualties.

That's in the book, too. Yes. I knew him and I knew Doc Lewis.

What happened to you after Dai Do?

I stayed in the battalion aid station until about the 10th or 12th of May and went on R&R to Bangkok. I came back a few days later and our rear was in Dong Ha at that time. Chief Gorsage made me battalion senior corpsman again. At that time, the battalion was in the Khe Sanh Valley area. It took me a whole day to get up to the battalion along with two other corpsmen who were assigned with me to the battalion command post.

We finally got up to the battalion south of Khe Sanh in the valley area. They had been overrun the night before and there were still NVA in some of the Fox Company positions. So we had to clear those out. We went from hilltop to hilltop for a few days, then wound up inside the perimeter at Khe Sanh. It was pretty much a bad situation there. This would have been late May or early June '68. They were still catching heavy artillery. I remember sitting on top of a hill on the west side of Khe Sanh inside the perimeter and watching counter-battery fire from these 155s. They were sandbagged and catching these big rounds coming into their position. They were just impacting into these 155 positions and I thought "Well, those guys are toast." The NVA had those 155s pinpointed. I think they were even shooting for each individual 155. These rounds were coming in from a place in Laos called Co Roc. You could see the 155 guys working the breeches of their guns as the shells were impacting around them. They were some of the gutsiest guys I've ever seen in my life.

They called me up to the battalion command post one evening for a scoop meeting. We were going to air-assault into the Ho Chi Minh trail area inside the Laotian border south of Khe Sanh, just above the A Shau Valley. Casualties were expected to be heavy. We could expect heavy anti-aircraft fire on the choppers coming in. There was a Special Forces team in the area that night and they had the radio open. You could hear them saying "We have beaucoup NVA." They were describing tanks, elephants, engineering troops, probably in the several hundreds in their area alone. And this was the area where we were going to be flown into.

Everyone was just freaked out. I remember Fritz Warren and LTCOL Ryan--everybody was really intense that night. LTCOL Ryan went around to every company commander and asked if they had any questions. LTCOL Ryan had been one of the battalion commanders in the 26th Marines. He was an old salt. He came to Medical and said to me, "Doc, do you have any questions?"

I said, "No sir."

He said, "I just want to tell you that there will be no medevacs on this operation. Whoever gets hurt, you will not medevac them. We will not give our position away by evacuating casualties. So suck it up and get it right."

I said, "Yes sir."

Then I thought, This is a smart guy. That's exactly what the NVA used to determine our position. Not just our position but the center of our position. Because Marines always had the habit of putting the LZ in the middle of something. It wasn't off to the side, usually. It had something to do with the CP. I thought that maybe we could do some good on this operation. And we did.

We kicked their butts all the way down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That road was literally strung with trucks and bicycles. One of our advance patrols found bicycles whose wheels were still spinning. We came upon base camps with triple-canopy jungle and cook fires still lit and smoking. They had recreation areas with volley ball nets. It was their rear and we were in it. We were kicking their butts and that felt good. Needless to say, they had interfered with my recreation for a long time so it was about time we got even.

Where did you go after this operation was over?

We went back to Khe Sanh after about 2 weeks of this "sightseeing" through the Laotian-Vietnamese border, which was probably the most beautiful country I had ever been in, and probably the most dangerous. Word came out that I was being relieved and that I should get back to Dong Ha. I went down to the air strip at Khe Sanh dodging artillery all the way. I got on the CH-34 chopper. The crew chief saw that I was a corpsman and he yelled over the rotor blades as we were lifting off and mortar rounds are coming in, "Doc, we've got one or two stops to make before we go back to Dong Ha."

Well, 10 hours later. . . It was late evening before we got to Dong Ha. I was their ad hoc corpsman on medevacs stabilizing the casualties as best I could. And that's how I functioned the rest of that day. That was my last day in the field. We went north to a hilltop. We went to all those places catching incoming, small arms fire, picking up these medevacs, taking them to Khe Sanh, where we would be mortared and shot at again as we landed. And I did that all day bringing casualties in to Charlie Med at Khe Sanh. We landed near Charlie Med on the strip, and they sent guys out to pick up the casualties from the chopper.

We got to Dong Ha that evening. The next morning the chief called me in and said, "You and Jack (my best friend at Dai Do) are acting funny. I want you get back to the ship and we're assigning you there. So they assigned me to the intensive care unit on board the ship taking care of Marines.

Then I went to the Philippines for the second time. They had to pull the ships off line for resupply or something on July 4th. Then I went back off the coast, floated around for a month until September. Around September 2/4 became an un-BLT and went off float.

I spent the rest of my tour until early October working at the battalion aid station at Quang Tri. I went to the field only one more time to deliver rabies vaccine. And that was the end of my combat tour.

When did you leave Vietnam?

Around the 1st of October.

Do you remember leaving?

Oh, yes. I couldn't believe it. I had seen a Marine killed the night before he was going to leave Vietnam. He was hit by lightning just a few feet from me. I knew that the chance of leaving Vietnam, even the last day, was not guaranteed. When I got on that two-engine plane at Quang Tri and we flew down to Danang, I knew they could still get me in Danang. I'd had seen rockets come in there. I joined up with some corpsmen I knew that were also leaving and we had just an unbelievable wipe-out party. I slept over at the Seabees because they had the best food. And the night before we were to leave country, the NVA sent us off in good style by throwing about 10 rockets into the R&R center, which was where we were gonna go that morning when the sun came up to catch our plane out.

I figured I wasn't safe until I was about 20 miles off the coast in the Pan Am 707. They could always get you.

What was coming home like?

It was weird. I've heard stories from everyone else, how they were spat on and degraded. I got off the plane at Travis. It was early morning--about 8 o'clock. I had been sitting next to a sailor. He got off the plane in front of me, had walked down the ramp, and was approaching the passenger terminal. All these people came out--I assumed family--and greeted him. I walked through the terminal and linked up with a corpsman I knew from the battalion. We caught a taxi there at Travis and drove to San Francisco International Airport. I just don't remember anybody saying anything to me. It was just another day in the life of San Francisco to me. Nobody said anything. I didn't get any dirty looks. It wasn't as though I didn't exist. I wasn't welcomed. Nobody held out their hand and said, "Good job, bad job." I was just another face in the crowd, even though I wasn't. Anyone that looked at me knew that I didn't look like the normal person. I had lost weight. I was the heaviest tanned I had ever been. If someone had looked into my eyes, they would have seen someone different from the usual person.

Did you go home from there?

I flew to Denver and was going to catch a plane to Liberal, Kansas, the nearest airport to my home. When I arrived in Denver, I went to the counter and found out that they had bumped me from my flight. I had to call my mother and tell her I couldn't get in that night. My family had all gathered together--aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, church members. There were about a hundred people waiting for me that night, had I gotten in.

I didn't know what to do that night, so I got a taxi and said to the driver, "I need a place to stay." He took me to a nice motel. I was checking in there when a guy walked by and put out his hand and said, "Good job, Doc."

He was with a bunch of other people. He said that he had been a Marine in Korea. "Corpsmen were always there with us. Thank you."

I have to say that to this day, those little two or three sentences that he spoke made all in the difference in the world. Same as the guy I met at the filling station yesterday that had a Marine Corps emblem on his Colorado license plate. I went over and said, "Were you with the Green Machine?" And he said yes. I said, "I was, too."

And he said, "Thank you."

There's a spirit of camaraderie that transcends anything you need from the outside. It's sort of a personal way to look at things.

I have to say that I did the best job I could. I was not always the bravest person. Some days I was the worst coward in the world. And on other days I was the bravest soul to be had on

the face of this earth and I didn't fear anything. I've listened to other people who have been in intense combat and that's their feeling, too. On any given day, any one of us could have been awarded the Medal of Honor or been court-martialed for cowardice. It was a role of the dice as to why we acted that way that day, or that hour, or that minute. I can remember getting up in firefights two or three times by myself with no Marines around, and having been the only target. I know they were zeroing in on me. And I'd do that for a day. And then the next day I didn't want to get up at all. I couldn't get up. I had to force everything that I had in me to make myself get up and die. Because that's what it meant.

It's been 37 years since you were there. Do you think about Vietnam much anymore?

No, I don't. It used to occupy more of my thoughts, but now it occasionally comes up. It takes a trigger now. The guy I talked to yesterday who was a Marine brought back memories and prepared me somewhat for today's conversation. But I won't be "normal" for the rest of the day after talking to you about this.

Does the war in Iraq trigger memories?

You bet. I hate that. I hate war. I hate anything to do with it. I know it's one-sided and I apologize to anybody who is having to face that experience now. It sounds unpatriotic. It sounds like I'm not in support of this country, but I can tell you that I do and I have and I will. Our foreign policy doesn't always reflect the intention or the ethics or the practical reasons why we're involved in certain issues. In my way of thinking, I'm more patriotic than the average politician. In fact, I'd consider myself a lot more patriotic. But I also know that the price an individual pays for a combat experience is too high. It may benefit the country. It may benefit the politicians. It may benefit the political atmosphere or whatever reason. I don't know. It's up to you and the other people in this world to decide that. But I can tell you from my personal point of view, and I have to say this. From my experience, the price the individual has to pay is too high.

I just don't want you to think that if this country needed something or if there was a justification, that I wouldn't be there with the rest of my friends.

You went back to Vietnam after the war. Why did you go?

That's a very good question. I didn't know why I wanted to go back. I left it open as a blank page in my personal history. I said, "I'll fill this in when I get back." I knew why I went in '67. To tell you the truth, it was an adventure. Vietnam was the biggest thing happening historically and in current affairs, and I wanted to experience it. I was from a small town in Kansas and I wanted to experience something of life, something different, something that I would know about when I got back.

Of course, that was being very naive and I certainly got a lot more than I ever asked for. When I went back in '97, I didn't know why. But I'm glad I went because I realized a couple of things. And it didn't come to me suddenly. It came to me gradually while I was there. A few of the Marines I knew from that era who went back with me would sit around and talk. It started off with sea stories but eventually we talked about the inner thoughts we were having and what they meant. It was unbelievable. I said, "One thing that I'm realizing now is that emotionally, I'm realizing that the war is over."

We had been there a week or two and gone through the villages we'd fought in feeling uneasy. Each of us felt we wanted to have a weapon in our hand to get ready for the shit to go down. But it didn't. The peace was there.

The example I'm thinking about is an area above Mai Xa Chanh through Lam Xuan. Lam Xuan was hell. There was an abandoned little village above Lam Xuan, a little village north of there, maybe half a click, called Nhi Ha. If you went to Nhi Ha in 1968, you were going to die. That was guaranteed.

When we went back in '97 they bussed us in as far as we could go, then we hiked a little ways into Nhi Ha. It was a little village that had grown back. It was still small but had a little elementary school. Some kids were dismissed while we Americans were there. They came out of the schoolhouse onto a little grassy slope where we were eating our box lunches. One of the guys in our group--Greg--had a bottle of bubble soap. He was standing upwind from these kids who ranged in age from about 5 through 12. They stood there as Greg blew these bubbles across their faces. They were reaching up trying to grab the bubbles and screaming with delight. As we all observed this, I realized the war was over.

That must have been very emotional for you.

It was a happy time. It was a happy time to suddenly be released from that trapped feeling and to realize that when we veterans left Vietnam the war was still going on and there were friends we left behind. And it was never brought to conclusion in our psyche, our way of thinking. It wasn't something I'd wake up to every day and think about. You saw the war on the news. You saw Walter Cronkite. You saw the evacuation from the embassy in Saigon. Everything was sort of mechanical--very unattached. So I didn't realize that this was one of the things that I needed to do. But the trip back released some peace of mind so that I could now look back and say the war is over. That was one of the most important realizations. I'm glad I went and that's why I went. And now I could fill in that blank page.

What did you do after you returned from your tour of duty in Vietnam?

I went back to school. I always wanted to be an archaeologist. I picked up a degree in archaeology and got married. I also picked up my pre-med courses just on the off chance that I could use them. I heard about this physician assistant program. I was a little bit older at that time. I was 28 and didn't think I wanted to go to medical school. So I applied to the physician assistant program. I had interviews at Emory, Wake Forest, and Duke. I got into all three of the programs but chose Duke because it was the first PA program and they had started the whole profession. It was a good choice and I enjoyed my academic experience at Duke.

As I was finishing up there, I was one of three people in the class to be invited to stay at Duke and to continue my training.

You're a PA now, aren't you?

I'm a PA and I have two jobs. I work for a spine trauma surgeon in Littleton, Colorado. He has a solo practice and I've helped him for about 10 years. On weekends, I travel up to a little mountain town called Leadville and I work in their little emergency room from Friday night to Sunday morning. If I want, I stay and fly fish or ski. I have a little sailboat up at one of the mountain lakes.

It sounds wonderful.

It's not a bad life. I maybe work a little harder than the average person but it's not work anymore. I've been a PA 27 years and it's not too stressful. The boss I work for down in Littleton is my age and we hang out together and we do good work. I enjoy helping people that are injured at both ends, either the specialty care of spine surgery or the emergency room. I also work part time, occasionally filling in at Adventist Hospital in Littleton. It's a level 2 trauma center.

I want to thank you so much for spending the afternoon with me. I've enjoyed hearing your story.

I have something else to say and I think it's very important. It's a postscript. Back when we had our reunion in New Orleans in '92, there were some things that were on my mind. Those concerned GEN Weise. And I know that all of us respect him dearly. Regardless of what we were put into and why, most of us now realize his job was not as easy as we assumed. But there were things on my mind.

I asked him to meet me one morning before anybody else got up and before he got surrounded by a hundred people. I asked if we could meet in a quiet area, alone. He was gracious enough and we did. We met one morning over coffee in a back room in our hotel.

I said, "You know, GEN Weise, I didn't like you and I didn't like what you did. It's taken me years to realize that you and I had opposite jobs. And our responsibilities were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Your job was to do as you were ordered--to take objectives according to those orders. My job was to save lives and to keep as many men alive as I could. And those two responsibilities conflicted. It took a long time for me to look at you and respect you for what you are. You always represented to me the causes of the death of my friends and the people I knew, and the faces that weren't going to be here anymore with us. I've got to tell you that I now realize 20 something years later, that it wasn't your fault. It wasn't your doing. That you would have felt the same way if you had been me. You are a very caring person. I know you now from a personal standpoint."

That was a very important thing for me to get off my chest. I can forgive people for that part of my history because hate takes a lot of energy.

I've got to tell you that when I interviewed the general, he mentioned that meeting he had with you and how much he appreciated what you said. He said that you were his doc and he really respected what you did. I think the feelings you both have for each other have grown out of that experience you had way back then and have matured. I think you really got through to him in that conversation.

I think we came to respect each other for that. I have. But it wasn't easy getting there. There was conflict and there was some hangup there. Because I came to realize that my job was different from his. But we both met our responsibilities. I know from the subtle things we did in Vietnam--the memorial services--I know that that bothers him and it can't help but bother him. I think it's always bothered him. But what are any of us going to do in a circumstance we're put into like that? It's the same thing we talked about before.

P.O Box 1292
Leadville, CO 80461